



# NDOT Gazex Avalanche Control Structure Replacement Project



United State  
Department of  
Agriculture  
Forest Service

## Decision Memo

*Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest  
Carson Ranger District*

Washoe County, Nevada

April 2021

## Background and Purpose and Need

The Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) operates a Gazex avalanche control structure on National Forest lands off the Mount Rose Highway (NV SR 431) in Washoe County. The facility is used to release built-up snow along a section of the highway near the Mt. Rose summit to reduce the hazard to travelers. This highway provides an important connection between the Reno area and Lake Tahoe and is heavily used in the winter by commuters and recreationists using Tahoe Meadows and the Mt. Rose Ski Area.

The current shelter does not meet building code requirements and NDOT submitted an application to construct a new shelter that meets code. In addition, the Gazex equipment used at the site has exceeded its typical life expectancy of 20 years. The purpose of this action is to approve the NDOT to construct a new shelter and replace the Gazex equipment.

## Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to approve the replacement of the existing building and the installation, operation, and maintenance of new Gazex equipment. The project is located off SR 431 near the Mt. Rose trailhead parking lot. A map of the project area is shown in the Figure 1.

The proposed building would be two-stories and approximately 10 feet by 10 feet. The color would be similar to the color of the existing structure and blend with the natural surroundings. Vegetation does not need to be removed for the new building since it was sited in an area without trees or Tahoe draba, a Forest Service sensitive plant. The existing exploder cannons would also be replaced along with the conduits from the shelter to the cannons. The existing cannon foundations may also need to be replaced; the new foundations would be in approximately the same location as the existing foundations. The conduits would be buried approximately one-foot in depth; trenching would be done by hand to avoid disturbance of any Tahoe draba plants in the vicinity.

After completion of the new facility the existing building and Gazex system equipment would be removed. The disturbed area would be re-contoured by hand to match the surroundings. The special use permit will be amended to include the new building.

**Access:** There is an existing native surface route, approximately 8-10 feet wide and 1,500 feet long, from the north end of the Mt. Rose trailhead parking lot to the building. The building and most of the access route are within the Rose-Galena Inventoried Roadless Area. This route would be used to bring in some small equipment and materials to the site. No expansion or improvements to this path would be implemented. Larger equipment and materials would be brought in by helicopter using the Mt. Rose Ski Area parking lot as the base of operations. The equipment is operated during winter months by NDOT personnel and maintenance occurs during the summer months to replace materials and service the exploders. A gate or natural barriers would be placed at the start of the route to restrict unauthorized vehicle access.

**Construction Schedule:** Construction is proposed to occur during the summer and fall of 2021 with the new Gazex system operational for the winter of 2021/2022. The old building and Gazex equipment would be removed in summer and fall of 2022.

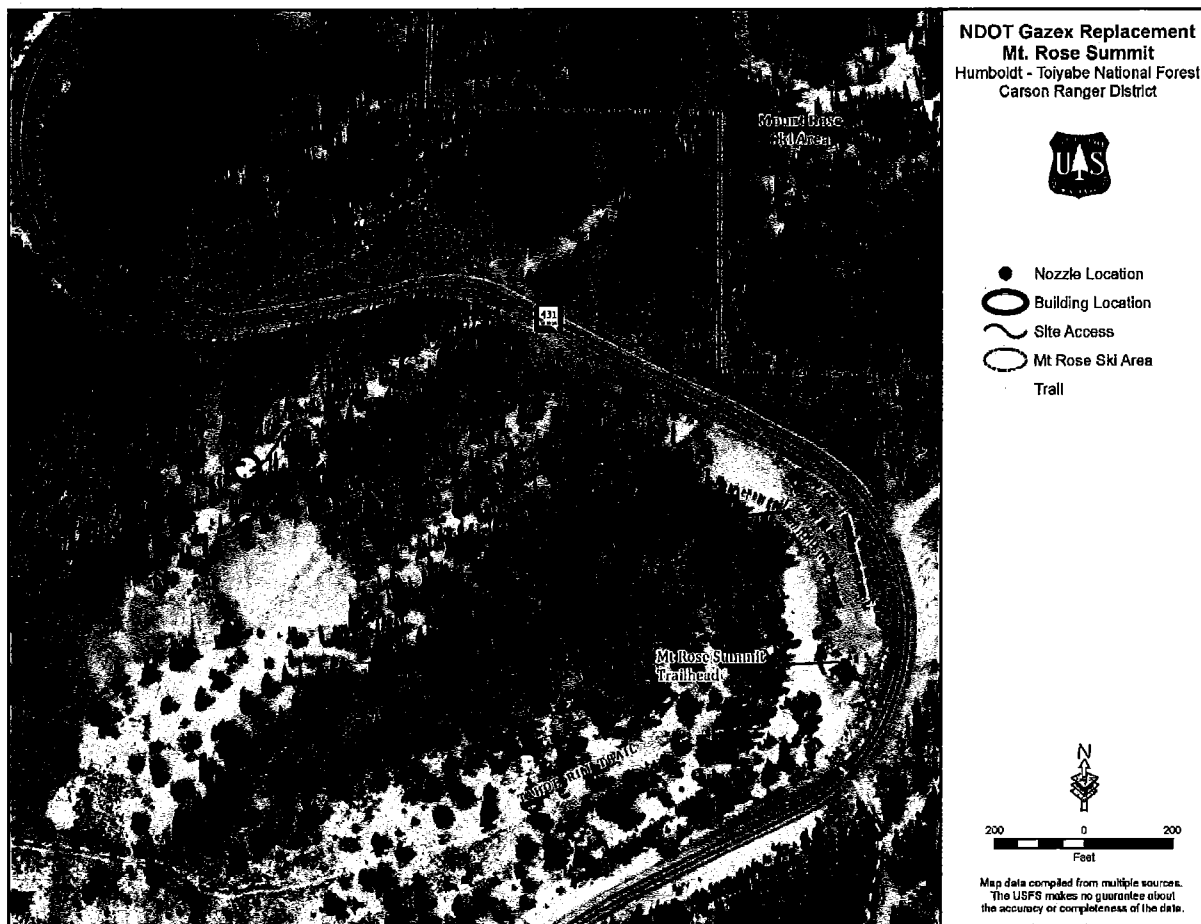


Figure 1. Location of the NDOT avalanche control structure and access route.

# Resource Protection Measures

This project will be implemented in compliance with all standards and guidelines identified in the Toiyabe Forest Plans and the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment. Federal, state, and local regulations pertaining to treatments will be followed. The following measures are specific to this project.

## Rare plants:

1. Occurrences of Tahoe draba (*Draba asterophora* var. *asterophora*) will be avoided by project activities.
2. Soil erosion control measures (such as silt fences, waddles, etc.) will be installed near the north edge of the project site to prevent inadvertent burial of Tahoe draba (*Draba asterophora* var. *asterophora*) plants located downslope of the project area; between the project site and SR 431.
3. Whitebark pine trees will be flagged and avoided by project activities to the extent feasible. Avoid damaging the bark or root systems of these trees. Minor limbing would be allowed.
4. New occurrences of Sensitive plant species discovered before or during ground-disturbing activities will be flagged and avoided by project activities. Unless specific alternative guidelines are established by the Forest or District Botanist to mitigate potential impacts.

**Soils:** Heavy rubber mats would be put down on the access route in sensitive locations to prevent soil disturbance and erosion from construction related traffic.

**Fire:** A fire precaution plan will be implemented during construction, including a helicopter safety flight plan.

## Decision

I have decided to approve this project as described above in the Proposed Action. It is also my decision that this project is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. The proposed action falls under the category listed at 36 CFR 220.6(e)(3): *"Approval, modification, or continuation of minor special uses of NFS lands that require less than twenty contiguous acres of land."*

I find that, based on a review of the following resource conditions, there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in EA or EIS. Specialist documentation is incorporated by reference into the Project Record and available upon request.

**a. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species -** — Based on analysis conducted in the Biological Evaluation and Assessment, the project may affect, but is not likely to

jeopardize the continued existence of whitebark pine. The project may impact Tahoe draba individuals but would not contribute to a trend toward federally listing or loss of viability of the Tahoe draba population located within the project area. The project will not result in any negative impacts to Forest Service Sensitive wildlife or aquatic species.

**b. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – none present**

**c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas** - The project area is not located in, nor will the project have any negative direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts on any congressionally designated areas.

**d. Inventoried roadless areas** – The NDOT structure and most of the access route are located within the Rose-Galena Inventoried Roadless Area. A roadless briefing paper was prepared that concluded that these activities are consistent with the 2001 Roadless Rule. The briefing paper was signed by the Forest Supervisor on March 30, 2021.

**e. Research natural areas – none present**

**f. American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – none present**

**g. Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas** – A cultural resource inventory report was prepared for this project (R2020041702918) and the Forest Service received concurrence on agency effect determination from the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in a letter dated November 6, 2020. No historic properties were identified within the project area.

## Public Involvement

The project was listed on the Humboldt-Toiyabe NF schedule of proposed actions in March 2021. A scoping document was also emailed to interested parties in March 2021. One comment in support and concurrence with the use of their parking lot was received from the Mt. Rose Ski Area. No other comments were received.

## Tribal Involvement

The Forest Service has consulted with the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California. The Tribe has no concerns with the project as planned.

## Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

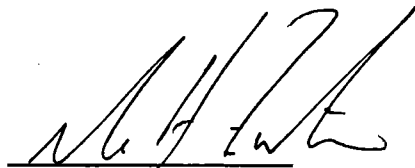
My decision is consistent with the Humboldt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1986), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Record of Decision (2004). The project conforms to forest plan goals and objectives, and standard and guidelines for cultural resources, soil and water, and wildlife and fisheries.

My decision also complies with the:

- Endangered Species Act
- Migratory Bird Treaty Act
- National Clean Water Act, as amended
- Executive Order 11988 Floodplain Management
- National Historic Preservation Act and 36 CFR Part 800-The Section 106 Process
- Humboldt-Toiyabe FSM Supplement to Chapter 2080 – Noxious Weeds Management
- Executive Order 12898 – Environmental justice

## Contact

For additional information concerning this decision contact Sally Champion, Carson Ranger District hydrologist, [sally.champion@usda.gov](mailto:sally.champion@usda.gov), or Marnie Bonesteel, Humboldt-Toiyabe NF lands special uses administrator, [marnie.bonesteel@usda.gov](mailto:marnie.bonesteel@usda.gov).



MATTHEW D. ZUMSTEIN  
Carson District Ranger

04/21/21  
Date

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